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ABSTRACT

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A Comparison of the National Preschool Curricula in Norway and Sweden

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Abstract

Norway and Sweden have similar histories within the field of early childhood education and similar traditions of state financial support of children. Recently, both countries adopted national preschool plans for children ages 1 to 5 years old. When comparing the two plans, the first noticeable difference is that the Norwegian approach gives teachers a detailed framework for their work with suggestions on content, methods to be used, and expected outcomes. In contrast, the Swedish plan is goal directed with a short introduction on the perspectives and values of children's learning and development. It contains almost nothing about the methods to be used. This article compares the two national plans in terms of their evolution, purpose, and content. The article also discusses how the plans reflect theories of learning and knowledge formation.

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The Social Framework for Preschools in Norway and Sweden

Norway and Sweden have long preschool traditions (Note 1), with roots in Froebel's kindergarten and a pedagogy built upon Rousseau and Pestalozzi, and later elaborated by Key and Dewey's work in the beginning of this century (Johansson, 1998; Balke, 1995).

In both countries, there is strong financial support for families with young children. All parents are entitled to maternity leave for 1 year and a monthly allowance for each child, which covers a major part of the income lost during the leave. A large part of the early childhood education system is financed by the state. In Sweden, there is also a law that guarantees a place in preschool for each working or studying parent's child within a few months from the day the parents request it (Socialstyrelsen, 1995:2).

Before 1996, children in both countries started school when they were 7 years old. Recently, however, the school entrance age was changed, and 6-year-olds are now in the school system—although "being in the school system" means different things in Norway and Sweden. In Norway, children begin school at age 6, with classes guided by the law and curriculum of the school (KUF, 1996). In Sweden, they still start school at age 7 (due to the law), but almost all 6-year-old children are in "preschool classes," which are guided by the same curriculum as compulsory school (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998b).

Because 6-year-olds are now in school, there is more room for younger children in the preschools, and the number of infants and toddlers has increased in the preschool system in both countries. In 1997, 60% of Norwegian children attended preschool institutions (SSB, 1999). In Sweden, 72% of children between 1 and 5 years of age attended preschools during the same year (Skolverket, 1998a).

A difference between the two countries is that the main authority for preschools in Norway is the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, while in Sweden, the Department of Education is the main authority. Another difference is that in Sweden about 10% of the institutions are private, while in Norway, almost 40% of the preschools are private.

The preschool staffs in both countries are well educated. In Sweden, about 60% of staff members have university degrees as preschool teachers, and in Norway, about 30% of staff members have tertiary degrees as preschool teachers. The remaining staff members working in preschools are teacher assistants, often educated as child caregivers or the equivalent—positions that require secondary education. These percentages reflect a different approach to staffing in each country. In Norway, the structure is more hierarchical with one preschool teacher acting as the leader of preschool groups, while in Sweden, the structure is less hierarchical, with two preschool teachers sharing responsibility.

Preschool for young children is quite common in both Norway and Sweden because a high percentage of parents work. To accommodate working parents, society has taken partial responsibility for young children's education and well-being. The development of national plans for preschools also reflects society's awareness of the importance of the early years for lifelong learning.

The Way to a National Curriculum

Sweden has a longer tradition of creating national plans for preschools than Norway. Historically, Sweden has exercised more national "control" (e.g., an effort for a solid national model with minimum standards). In the beginning of the 1970s, "Barnstugeutredningen" (The Child Care Survey), which was an official state commission, published its work, based on substantial development work and research (SOU, 1972:26; SOU, 1972:27). The commission sought to elucidate content and methods in Swedish preschools. The commission tried to compensate for the past and adopted new theories of children's learning and development as starting points for the methods in preschools. Among other things, the commission suggested a general preschool for all children up to age 6. The commission also proposed an education based on communication and dialogue. In accordance with the aims of this document, from 1975 to 1979, the National Board of Health and Welfare, which at that time was responsible for preschools, published a series of books on different topics called "Working Plans" (Socialstyrelsen, 1975a, 1975b, 1975c, 1976a, 1976b, 1979). Many other publications of interest for preschool staff were also published during this time.

Because the committee report was used as part of the literature in the education of preschool teachers at that time, the Swedish "Barnstugeutredningen" also influenced the Norwegian preschool system (SOU,

1972:26; SOU, 1972:27).

In 1982, the Norwegian preschools were provided with a handbook called "Goal Directed Work in Preschool" (FAD, 1982). This handbook was the first public document for people working with young children in which the function of preschools in relation to family and society was stated. Historically, Norway was far behind the other Nordic countries in the development of day care institutions. (Note 2)

In 1988, Sweden developed its first national guidelines for preschools, called "Educational Program for Preschools" (Socialstyrelsen, 1988:7). In these guidelines, the framework for the community responsible for the preschool was established. For implementation of the general guidelines, another book was published, called "Learning in Preschool" (Socialstyrelsen, 1989), which was directed toward staff working with children. The National Board of Health and Welfare also took initiative in two research overviews to give staff a better foundation for understanding and making use of the guidelines (Kärrby, 1990; Pramling, 1993).

In the revision of the Norwegian national Act of Day Care Institutions in 1984, it was specified that all Norwegian preschools had to make an annual plan drawing up the institution's activities. Because of this requirement, preschool staff needed some guidelines (P-699-TRE, 1984). In 1987, the government developed a guide to assist staff in the compilation of the annual plan (P-0742, 1987). This document set forth directions for the plan's composition and form, but it did not say anything about the content of the preschools' activities. In 1992, the first draft of a national plan was developed in Norway (NOU, 1992:17).

Both Sweden and Norway have come a long way—from having no guidelines at all to having national curricula in place. Preschool teachers have slowly been introduced to the idea of having a curriculum—something that could not have been introduced 20 years ago. It could also be said that both national plans are based on the professional experiences and reflections of preschool teachers through their local development work over the years. In official documents, the view of preschool has changed from preschool being viewed as a place as far removed from "school" as possible to being viewed as a place where lifelong learning begins (Pramling Samuelsson, 1998).

Introduction of a Curriculum for 1- to 5-Year-Olds

In Norway, the "Framework Plan for Day Care Institutions" was implemented in January 1996 (Q-0903B, 1996; Q-0917E, 1996). The national Act on Day Care Institutions by this time had been revised, and the framework became a regulation within the Act (Q-0902B, 1995; Q-0513, 1995).

The framework was the first national plan for Norwegian preschools. In this plan, the government made its policy intentions clear and also formulated more explicit demands for educational work in preschools. The intention was that the plan should reflect the values of the preschools and, at the same time, bring in new features and offer the opportunity for further development.

Sweden's new curriculum "Curriculum for Preschool" (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a) for children up to 6 years old was implemented in August 1998. At this time, there was a change from having the Department of Social Welfare (Socialdepartementet) as the authority for preschools to having the Department of Education as the authority—a move that reflected a changing view of preschools. *Preschools are now part of the education system in Sweden, while they are still part of family policy in Norway.*

In Sweden, every community has a sum of money to use to educate its preschool staff in accordance with the new goals of the curriculum. In Norway, counties get money from the state for local development work in preschools in general. Applications from the preschools for work related to the implementation of the national plan are given priority. In both countries, there is an optimistic view of renewal within the field of early childhood education.

Methods of Analysis

Qualitative analysis is often used to enhance understanding of specific conditions under scrutiny. Qualitative analysis can be an interactive, dialectical process characterized by Dewey as "a particular form of social action that creates dialectical confrontations and produces inter-subjective meaning" (in Clandinin, 1985, p. 365). Within ethnography, document analysis is talked about as a source to generate new understanding of central phenomena. The goal of comparative analysis proposed by Glaser and Strauss is to use document analysis as a source in the search for grounded theory (in Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). In document analysis, comparative reading from other settings of relevance is seen as important (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

In our study, we use document analysis techniques to examine a broad range of official as well as unofficial documents. We also present some of the recent research and literature in the field. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) state that "rather than being viewed as a (more or less biased) source of data, official documents and statistics should be treated as social products; they must be *examined*, not simply used as a resource. To treat them as a resource and not a topic is to trade on the interpretive and interactional work that went into their production and to treat as a reflection or document of the world phenomena that are actually produced by it" (p. 137).

To deal with the fact that the researcher herself or himself is a part of the social practice is no simple matter. Hammersley and Atkinson suggest that the reflexive ethnographer needs to be aware that all classes of data will have their problems and that none can be treated as unquestionably valid representations of reality. Among other factors, documents should be seen in relation to context and use. In written sources, one has to consider the following questions: Who writes them? In what way are documents written and for what purpose? How are they read? On what occasions? With what outcomes? What is recorded? What is omitted? What is taken for granted? (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 143). Curricula are often a result of political compromises. One must be aware of the potential bias woven into the documents. It is also important to determine whether the document was produced in a social setting with an oral tradition. The preschool traditions in Sweden and Norway are part of an oral tradition, and the fact that we analyze these two national plans does not mean that we can determine how the documents function in practical life.

Our way of analyzing these documents can in one way be seen as analytical and including an inductive-deductive-inductive process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). The process goes from empirical data to theory and back to empirical data. As the documents were read, central concepts from the documents were written down in columns. After listing these concepts, we read related literature and a wide range of official documents repeatedly. The final categorizing of data allowed further comparisons, analyses, and discussions in the light of historical traditions, contemporary practice, and recent research. The main results are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Two researchers conducted the analysis of the plans. That one of us comes from Norway and the other

from Sweden, and that we are familiar with our respective country's preschool traditions, helps make our conclusions more valid. Data are always in some way or another structured through individual experiences. "As important as whether a given account is 'accurate' or 'objective' is what it tells us about the teller's perspectives and presuppositions" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, pp. 130-131). In this light, the reading and our interpretations can also be seen as part of the aforementioned problems. It must also be noted that the awareness of our reflexivity was important to the process.

Two Different Kinds of Plans

The two national plans are formulated very differently. First, the Norwegian plan is called a *framework plan*, while the Swedish plan is called a *curriculum*. The Norwegian framework consists of 159 pages, while the Swedish curriculum consists of 16 pages. The framework plan creates structures within the educational work conducted in all preschool institutions, both in public and private sectors, while the Swedish curriculum directs only the public preschools. However, the Swedish curriculum does function as a guide for the private sector and will also be used as a quality gauge and an indicator, in accordance with the norms, for state interventions.

The Norwegian framework, to a large extent, discusses *methods* for the teacher to use when working with children and how teachers can use the framework plan in their own *planning and evaluation*. Norwegian preschools must, according to the Act, make an annual plan for the institution's work. The Swedish curriculum provides more or less *an approach to perspectives in learning, values, and goals*. It does not discuss methodological questions at all and focuses more on documentation of the activities than on planning as an instrument for evaluating quality issues.

Both plans clearly state that preschool should be viewed as the first step in a child's lifelong learning. This perspective is especially obvious in the Swedish plan, in which the structure of the curriculum for 1- to 5-year-old children (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a) is similar to the structure of the curriculum for 6- to 16-year-old children (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998b). It is interesting to note that in Sweden, at the same time that the perspective on learning and knowledge formation has been refined and the values and content clearly spelled out, preschool has gradually become deregulated. Deregulation is strong in all areas of Swedish society, but it is especially strong in the school system where most decisions are supposed to be made by the students and their teachers in each classroom. Preschools, too, have become goal directed, which means that there are specific outcomes or goals to strive for and that it is the responsibility of each teacher to reach those intended goals.

When comparing the two plans, the first noticeable difference is that the Norwegian approach gives teachers *a detailed framework for their work with suggestions for content, methods to be used, and expected outcomes*. In contrast, the Swedish plan is *goal directed* with a short introduction on the *perspectives and values of children's learning and development*. It contains almost nothing about the methods to be used. One wonders if, in fact, the Swedish curriculum is more a philosophical framework, while the Norwegian plan is more a traditional curriculum where goals, content, methods (organization and working methods), and evaluation are formulated (Jackson, 1992). The Norwegian plan is fairly extensive because no planning document had previously been drawn up for Norwegian day care institutions. In addition, the plan was intended for use by staff with varying training and competence (Q-0917E, 1996, p. 6).

Structure of the Plans

The Swedish curriculum consists of two main parts. The first part is "Preschool's Ground Values and Mission," and the second part is "Goals and Directions" concerning the educational work in preschools. The second part of the curriculum consists of five groups of goals and directions: (1) norms and values, (2) development and learning, (3) children's influence, (4) preschool and home, and (5) cooperating with school (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a).

The Swedish curriculum explicitly states what children should learn in preschool. The content is tied directly to clearly defined goals that are set forth as an introduction to the first three chapters of the plan. The goals can be interpreted in terms of the preschool's responsibility to give children the opportunity to develop in the desired direction. The goals, however, must also be adapted to individual children to accommodate different lengths of stay in preschool, capabilities, and possibilities based on developmental and physical need. Staff members are guided by directives associated with each goal and are made aware of their responsibility. By using these directives, a staff member learns how each child develops and grows during her or his preschool experience.

The purpose of the curriculum is to provide preschool educational opportunities based on the fundamental components of care, foster care, learning, and education. Activities, therefore, should stimulate play, creativity, and a joyful learning experience, and they should also stimulate the children's interest in new experiences. Activities should help children develop new skills or enhance existing capabilities. Flow of ideas and diversity in experiences should also be explored (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a).

The Norwegian framework consists of three main parts. Part one is a general section stating objectives and basic principles underlying the work. The headings include "Day Care Institution's Role in the Society" and "Aims and Values of Day Care Institutions." Part two is about content and areas of experience and learning. This section contains "The Framework Plan—Totality and Interpretations"; "Social Interaction, Play, and Day-to-Day Activities"; "Culture and Curriculum"; and "Sami Language and Culture." Part three discusses using the plan. It includes chapters entitled "Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation"; "Responsibility, Forms of Operation, and Collaboration"; and "Development of the Day Care Institution."

The plan states that all children in Norwegian preschools should in some way or another *experience* five subject areas during a year, which are called the preschools' *time-limited or periodic content*. These subject areas are (1) society, religion, and ethics; (2) aesthetic subjects; (3) nature, technology, and environment; (4) language, literacy, and communication; and (5) physical activity and health.

Each of the five subject areas covers a broad area of learning, offering preschool children opportunities to acquire experiences and knowledge and to learn skills and develop attitudes. In the plan, these areas are integrated and are *to be present in day-to-day life, in play and social interaction* (i.e., in the *continuous content*).

The plan sees content and working methods as integrated. The children are supposed to learn through play and social interactions. The framework plan highlights the importance of play, creativity, joy, and humor as factors permeating work in all learning areas. This emphasis is shown in an overview model in the plan (Q-0903B, 1996 p. 30). The Norwegian plan sets up groups of goals at the end of the chapters presenting each subject area. Content and goals of religion and ethics are set forth in a special section within the first subject area. The plan has an overall emphasis on the importance of continuity and progress in the preschools' content, and it suggests that as children move into their older preschool

years, more time will be spent on adult-supervised, structured work in connection with the five subject areas (Q-0903B, 1996, p. 38).

In the Swedish curriculum, there is an obvious distinction between the child's individual development and the responsibility of the teacher. In the Norwegian plan, the teacher's work and the child's experiences are intertwined.

Looking at other content areas in the two plans, we see a certain similarity when it comes to the substance of the plans' content. The tradition as well as the idea of renewal is present in both plans. Historically, in both Norway and Sweden, preschool teachers do not begin the teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics (Johansson, 1998; Balke, 1995). This practice is based on the belief that preschools should not compete with schools. Also, preschool is supposed to be an alternative form of education, different from school. Today, however, we can see the same subject areas in both plans, although they are not expressed in terms of reading, writing, and mathematics. In both plans, there is also a strong emphasis on thematic learning instead of subject-focused learning. If we look at the areas of language, literacy, and communication, it seems that the Swedish plan focuses more on the process of reading and writing, while the Norwegian plan focuses more on development of language in general.

The Norwegian national plan provides a wide framework or *a maximum plan*, within which the staff can make choices. The Swedish plan is a curriculum, giving clearly defined goals for different areas in which each child is striving to develop knowledge and learn. In this respect, it can be viewed as a *minimum* or floor for what children are supposed to earn. This purpose is not spelled out in the preschool curriculum, but it is stated in the continuous curriculum for 6- to 16-year-old children. The wide framework or maximum plan is focused on the teacher's choices, while the minimum, to some extent, is focused on the child.

Differences in Statements of Values in the Plans

In both countries, the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child provides a basis for the national plans. In the Norwegian plan, values such as "respect for life, equality, tolerance and respect for people from other cultures, tolerance and respect for people with disabilities, equality of the sexes, altruism and solidarity, justice, truth and honesty, peace and understanding, responsibility for conservation of nature and culture, and responsibility for others" are central in children's development in preschool (Q-0917E, 1996, p. 13).

The Norwegian plan underlines the responsibility parents and family have for the care and upbringing of children, and it also recognizes parents' right to choose education for their children. The family and preschools are seen to have different functions. The preschool is seen as a supplement to the home. The Norwegian plan points at the preschools' preventive role in society.

"The Norwegian preschools are to be built upon the ethical values which are deeply rooted in Christianity and are supposed to have a broad acceptance among the public at large. The day care institution shall build its activity on the ethical ground values that are rooted in Christianity, and that are presupposed to have a broad acceptance in the Norwegian people" (Q0903-B, 1996, p. 22). The framework plan states that neutrality in values is neither possible nor desirable. Preschools have to work with ethical questions, concretized through cultural traditions and major Christian festivals. Continuity is important, because both schools and preschools are built upon the same statutory statements of values. The parents have the main responsibility for children's upbringing, and they must guide their

children in matters of lifestyle. In this matter, cooperation with parents is highly recommended and stressed.

In the Swedish plan, one task is to develop values according to society or, in other words, an ethical code of democracy. This code should underlie the activities in preschools. "Preschool is resting upon the ground of democracy," the curriculum states (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a, p. 7). Further on, the plan says that the preschools' activities are to be in accordance with fundamental democratic values. Care of and respect for other human beings in the form of justice and equality should form the basis for activities. Children develop ethical values and norms in everyday experiences. Adults' ways of relating to children and the world around them influence children's understanding and respect for democratic values in a society. Children's experiences should be focused on understanding and humanity, and they should be based on facts and comprehension (Skolverket, 1998b).

Although the two national plans are built upon much of the same *humanistic traditions*, they are grounded in different value systems. While the Norwegian plan is built upon *a religious, Christian base* (Note 3), the Swedish plan is built upon *a democratic base*. A democratic approach is expressed in the Swedish plan in the chapter "Children's Influence." In one of the chapter's sections, the development of children's ability to understand and act on democratic principles, through participation in different kinds of cooperative activities and by framing decisions, is emphasized (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a, p. 14). The plan also clearly emphasizes a group perspective, both in relation to the work with children and the staff's approach to conducting their work as team members.

While the Swedish curriculum speaks about the *staff as a team*, the Norwegian plan stresses *each staff member's own individual responsibility* in her or his work with children, although it also says that teamwork is important. The framework plan stresses that it is *the individual preschool teacher who has the main responsibility* and is seen as a guarantee that the preschool will be run as a pedagogical institution (Q-0903B, 1996, p. 109; Stortingsmelding nr. 8, 1987-88, p. 88).

Values in Children's Everyday Life

In the Swedish curriculum, allowing children to have an influence on their everyday life in preschool is formulated as a specific goal. Preschool should strive to give each child adequate opportunities to develop the following abilities (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a, p. 14):

- the ability to express thoughts and opinions, and thereby gain influence on her or his situation;
- the ability to take responsibility for her or his own actions and for the environment of the preschool; and
- the ability to understand and act in accordance with democratic principles by being involved in different forms of cooperation and decision-making processes.

According to the Swedish plan, democracy and aspects of it should constitute both content and method in the everyday life of children. Preschool should actively and consciously influence and stimulate children to develop an understanding of the common democratic values in our society, to make it possible for them to take part in society in the future. Preschool should strive for each child to develop the following (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a, p. 11):

- openness, respect, solidarity, and responsibility;
- the ability to respect and understand other human beings and their situations;

- the ability to discover, reflect upon, and state her or his own opinion on different ethical dilemmas and life questions in everyday life;
- an understanding of all people's equal worth, independent of gender and social or ethnic background; and
- respect for all living species and care for our environment.

Besides the more specific goals, cooperation with parents is viewed as a necessity.

One of the subject areas in the Norwegian plan is "society, religion, and ethics." Through work in the subject area "local environment and society," the preschool can help children (Q-0903B, 1996, p. 65):

- get to know the local community through direct experience and discover how different functions in society and working places are connected and their importance for day-to-day life;
- realize that all people, young and old, are members of the community and that they can contribute to the community;
- get to know about social and cultural differences in the preschool and the local environment; and
- get a beginning idea of how society is built, historically and at present.

The Norwegian plan says that preschool has an important function as a transmitter of tradition and should strengthen children's identity and ties with their home community by acquainting them with local history, landscape, architectural traditions, and local song and music traditions.

The Norwegian plan also states that in the area of religion and ethics, preschool should help children (Q-0903B, 1996, p. 70):

- gain insight into Christian basic values and their place in our cultural heritage;
- acquire society's established norms and values;
- get answers to religious questions and get the opportunity to wonder in silence;
- gain knowledge about the background and traditions of Christianity and experience the joy of the Christian festivals;
- live in a loving environment and learn to take responsibility for the immediate environment, her or his home, country and people, nature and culture; and
- develop interest in and respect for people with different cultural and religious backgrounds by organizing distinct cultural meetings.

It becomes quite clear that the goals in the Swedish curriculum focus on *developing a democratic person*, while the goals in the Norwegian plan focus on *Christianity and local culture* as central in the upbringing of children. On one hand, it could be argued that the values of Christianity and democracy are similar because they both promote respect for all human beings and plead for good behavior towards each other. On the other hand, Christianity has certain beliefs and values that are there to be followed, while the ideal of democracy is supporting people in finding out what is good in many different ways. These perspectives have to be viewed in relation to traditions and the social order in the two countries. In Norway, the Church, and thereby the belief in Christianity, has a strong position on a state level. In Sweden, the state and the Church work separately, perhaps because Sweden has become even more multicultural than Norway.

Table 1

An Overview of the Two National Plans

	Sweden	Norway
Authority	Department of Education	Ministry of Child and Family Affairs
National Plan	Goal oriented	Framework oriented
Methods	None	Extensive
Content	Understand aspects of the world, develop skills	Experience and take part in culture and curriculum
Values	Humanistic Democracy, ethics	Humanistic Religion, culture, ethics
Staff	Teamwork Shared responsibility among teachers	Teamwork Preschool teacher mainly responsible
Means for Development	Documentation	Annual planning
Focus	Product in the future	Process

The differences between the two plans are summarized in Table 1. We have chosen just a few interesting aspects that reflect different approaches in the two plans. The authorities for preschools are different, and while the Swedish plan is goal oriented, the Norwegian plan is framework oriented. Another difference is that methods are not mentioned in the Swedish plan, while they are a central part of the Norwegian plan. The "what" aspect is clear in the Swedish plan (what children are supposed to learn), while the "how" aspect (how to work with children) is clear in the Norwegian plan. The plans share some values, but important differences exist. Both plans stress the teamwork of the staff, but they differ in matters of responsibility. In the Swedish plan, documentation of the work is an important task, while planning is more a focus for Norwegian preschool staff. In a way, the Swedish plan focuses on the product (in the future), while the Norwegian plan focuses on the process.

Theories of Learning and Knowledge Formation

Sommer (1997) is one of many researchers who believe that most theories of child development are old-fashioned and not appropriate for studying children in today's society. Several explanations are offered for this view. Some researchers believe that society has changed so drastically that it bears little resemblance to what society was like when these theories were developed, and therefore children today get different experiences compared with children two generations back. Very few children in the Western world grow up with a mother who stays home to care for the children and the family full time. Instead, children have relationships with, and learn from, other children and adults during an extended day. Another factor may be that the view of children has changed in modern society.

Theories of children's learning within the field of early childhood education have been based on

developmental theories, in which children's biological stages have been considered to be of great importance for learning. Both Piaget (1973, 1977) and Vygotsky (1972, 1978) have based their theories on hierarchical maturity stages. The difference between their theories has been a question of whether it is the child's stage or social interaction that is at the core of development.

One question in the discussion about children's learning is whether development or learning comes first. Other theories about children in school have focused on learning in terms of what children can remember as a capability influenced by the world around them, without taking into consideration the child's development. Earlier theories have focused on either the inner or the outer world as the most important factor in learning. One implication of modern research on young children is that learning and development as two separate categories have no relevance because the inner and outer worlds are dependent on each other and influence each other (Pramling, 1993). There is no development without learning, and no real learning without development (Doverborg, Pramling & Qvarsell, 1987).

A new paradigm of learning, which suggests understanding as a way of experiencing something, is gaining support (Marton & Booth, 1997). When a child (or an adult) learns something, her or his experience of the world changes and a "New World" appears. In other words, knowledge formation is seen as an internal relation between children and the world around them. Knowledge becomes subjective and objective at the same time because the outer world cannot be distinguished from the child's earlier experiences. The two earlier separated notions, development and learning, now become two aspects of the same phenomenon.

This change implies a change in the perspective of seeing children as psychological and biological individuals who are not yet fully developed but who have needs that are to be satisfied. Stages of development and maturity were seen as a base for teaching, for what children could "take in." Children and their capabilities can, in this perspective, be measured and evaluated as being objective—either children know something or they do not.

The Concept of Learning in the Plans

Our further analysis will focus on the plans' perspectives on learning, which can be interpreted from the plans and from relevant background materials. Our conclusions are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison of the Plans' Perspectives on Children's Learning

Aspects of Learning	Sweden	Norway
Scope	The entire child Comprehensive concept of learning	The entire child Comprehensive concept of learning
Play/Learning	Integration play-learning	Play *and* learning
Goal	Develop knowledge on different aspects of the world	Develop basic competence Knowledge, skills, attitudes
Method	Continuous	Maturity and stages
Care/Education	Care as presumption for learning	Education and care as two of a kind
Structure of the day	No distinction between formal and informal learning	Distinction between formal and informal learning

The Norwegian plan is strongly oriented towards the upbringing of children in relation to the local environment. Transfer of culture and values adapted to local social environments is seen as a central task. Learning is seen as part of the child's *upbringing*, which includes a strong emphasis on Christian norms and values in the social competence of daily life today. Emphasis is placed on the process of child rearing and transmission of culture. The Swedish plan is more cognitively oriented towards *children's learning*. The perspective is to a larger extent on children's development of skills and abilities. Skills and values are therefore relevant to what society's general needs are in the future. The Swedish plan's emphasis is placed on the product as a result of learning skills and abilities through mediation of knowledge believed to be needed in the future, while the Norwegian plan's emphasis is placed on the process of growing up in society today built on its historical roots and traditions.

An integration or separation of learning and play is interesting—especially if one takes the perspective of Broström and Vejleskov (1999) in which they discuss "learning play" and "play learning" as a way to show how these two notions have to be viewed in a new light in modern education. Traditionally, play and learning activities have been viewed as two distinct activities, in that play has been the child's own world, while learning activities have been related to a teacher. These two paradigms seem to acquire new meaning in this era of modern research (Pramling, 1994).

In the Norwegian plan, children are supposed to be exposed to different subject areas, while in the Swedish plan, children are supposed to develop a beginning understanding of different aspects of the world around them. In both plans, the whole day is used to influence children's learning. The Norwegian plan stresses informal learning and says that learning should be achieved through play and social interaction and an integration between different subjects and daily activities. However, it also indicates that children learn basic competencies, such as social competence and an ability to communicate, during the informal time, and they learn about different subjects during activities planned by the teacher (Q-0903B, 1996, pp. 40-41). The Swedish perspective focuses more on continuity, while the Norwegian perspective focuses on the maturity stages. In Sweden, the child's life-world and earlier

experiences are seen as significant aspects of theories of learning, while in Norway, a mixture of theories of learning and child development is more often used (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and social theories).

With the above discussion as background, we would like to point out that the Norwegian plan states that learning is both formal and informal and that the plan uses and discusses both of these concepts. The view of learning as a distinction between *informal and formal learning* (as two different kinds of learning processes) is connected to *continuous content* and *periodic content*. When the formal learning aspect is discussed, the framework states, "It is the adult's duty to give the children experiences that are stimulating and are structuring the child's learning, and to secure progression that suits the child's needs and abilities." The plan underlines the importance of informal learning. In fact, the plan discourages the staff from using formal learning: "In the work with the youngest children who are under school age, you should worry about emphasizing formal learning and acquisition of specific knowledge" (Q-0903B, 1996, pp. 30, 41, 46). It also stresses learning through care.

Learning and knowledge formation lead to understanding, seeing, and conceptualizing. In both plans, learning becomes a question of awareness, of creating a meaning. The concept of meaning is central in relation to learning as expressed in the Swedish plan (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1998a; SOU, 1997:21; SOU, 1997:157). Under the heading "Knowledge and Learning," it is stated that:

> Knowledge is conquered through learning, a kind of learning that happens in different ways in different environments: Through verbal activity, writing, reading, and acting; this can occur in texts and pictures, but learning is also in drama, play, singing, and music. It is not only through the mind we learn, we are learning with the whole body. And everything we learn cannot be verbalized. (SOU, 1997:157, p. 47)

Three aspects of knowledge are pointed out in the Swedish plan: (1) the constructive aspect of knowledge—knowledge is a way of making the world understandable and meaningful; knowledge is not only a reflection of the world; (2) the contextual aspect of knowledge—knowledge is related to a context, towards which knowledge takes on meaning; and (3) the instrumental aspect of knowledge—knowledge is a tool for cultivating and managing the world. Play is seen as an important dimension in children's learning. In play, children develop their communicative and social competence. Play is especially important in work with children in need of special help and care.

The notion of knowledge in the Swedish curriculum includes facts, understanding, skills, and implicit aspects of reality. Knowledge and learning are, in this perspective, seen as part of a process that requires interaction with other people and phenomena in the world. Knowledge and learning are not only related to the individual person but to something that is created and defined together with other persons. In line with this way of looking at knowledge is the view of the child as an active co-creator of her or his own knowledge.

In the Norwegian plan, the child in her or his entirety is emphasized. The plan regards development of the child as a dynamic interaction between physical and mental capacities. The plan states that the child is not to be seen as separate from the environment that surrounds her or him. The child is from the very beginning influenced by people and the environment, and in turn, the child influences the environment. The child is seen as social, active, and exploring, developing through interactions with other adults, children, and the environment. Children are to be met with warmth, acknowledgment, and encouragement. Further, it is emphasized that all children must be encouraged to see themselves as valuable and accepted. The right to participate, in ways appropriate to their age, is not seen as a waiting time or a "pre"-school time for children. Childhood cannot be pushed forward or recaptured—it has to

have its time and be seen as a period in life with a value of its own. The Norwegian framework is a tool for adults; however, it points out that: "It is the child's own viewpoint that always has to be present in all planning in day care institutions. It is the adult's duty to seek the children's perspective when work is planned" (Q-0903B, 1996, p. 18).

The Norwegian plan builds upon an overall view of the concept of learning. The care for the child and the interaction between the adult and the child in situations of care are seen as an important base for the child's learning. Care is defined as having two parts. All actions attached to nurturing, including physical care, are considered as care. The adult's attitude towards the child who receives the care is stressed. Care is then characterized by sensitivity, nearness, ability, and a will to interact (Q-0903B, 1996, p. 30). In this approach, the child is viewed in biological, psychological, and social contexts.

In other words, in trying to develop a new way of thinking about early childhood education by combining the traditional school (formal) and the preschool tradition (informal), we end up with something that is neither preschool nor school. There have been official discussions of school and preschool pedagogy in both Norway and Sweden (Utbildningsdepartementet, 1996:61; Stortingsmelding nr. 40, 1992-93). In Norway, research on a national level has been done on this topic in relation to the school entrance age (Haug, 1992, 1996). In Sweden, an overview of research in this field has also been carried out (Pramling Samuelsson & Mauritzson, 1997).

Summary and Discussion

In Sweden and Norway, most preschool teachers and staff have warmly welcomed the new plans. They believe the respective plans will help them in their work with children, as well as contribute positively to the status of preschools in their countries (Alvestad & Nordvik, 1993). But the fact that the two countries have national curricula does not mean that the plans are being implemented consistently. Questions about the implementation of the plans must be raised and discussed from different viewpoints (Jackson, 1992; Goodlad, 1988; Gundem, 1990).

Implementation is not a simple task of just reading the plan and agreeing with it. The implementation of national curricula is a complex area, raising varied and difficult questions (Alvestad, 1996). In both countries, some financial support is given by the national governments to help with implementation, but questions about implementation remain: Is funding sufficient? Do staff members get enough time to discuss the content of the plan and the different implications the plan can have for their practical work? What does the plan mean to the preschool teachers and their teaching assistants? How do they use the plan? What is their understanding of the concept of learning in the plan? And what is the relation to their practical work with the children individually and in groups? The Norwegian framework plan leaves room, for example, for very different interpretations of how the five subject areas should be interpreted and used. The Swedish plan leaves room for, among other things, a variety of methods. These are all important questions for future study (Alvestad, 1998, 1999).

What is new in the plans? What is it that preschools have not been working with previously? The main difference in the Swedish national curriculum is that it is a regulation and not general guidelines, as it was earlier in its development. Related to the implementation of the plans is also the process of evaluation. This task is central to the staff in preschools in both countries. Staff members have to work on all different aspects of child development and learning as well as focus on values and norms. In both plans, there are also new content areas, such as beginning mathematics, reading, and writing, which previously were subjects children were expected to learn in school but which now have also become the

preschools' responsibility. Preschool staff previously focused on young children's social competence as the main aspect of their work. Now preschool staff cannot focus only on children's social development or specific aspects of learning and development. All staff members have to work on the whole as well as on all aspects of learning and development. This goal is more clearly expressed in the Swedish curriculum than in the Norwegian framework plan where the teacher still has more freedom to choose what the focus of her or his work will be.

Both plans could be seen as being grounded in a sociocultural perspective. But when we look at the aspects of learning that are central in both plans, they differ in some ways within this perspective. In the Norwegian framework, the concept of learning is strongly related to socialization, care, and the upbringing of the child. In fact, the plan discourages preschool teachers from emphasizing too much formal learning and working on specific knowledge in preschool. The Swedish curriculum focuses on learning holistically but also points out the cognitive view of developing children's understanding about different aspects of the world around them. Maybe it could be said that the Swedish perspective is more sociocognitive. The Norwegian perspective stresses aspects such as maturity, the needs of the child, and socialization—an approach that seems to be more in line with a traditional preschool perspective and the earlier Educational Program for Preschools in Sweden (Socialstyrelsen, 1987).

Looking at the content of the plans and the organization of the staff working in preschools, it could be said that the Norwegian plan is very different from a traditional school curriculum. At the same time, the hierarchy of the staff is more similar to the school structure as it used to be. The Swedish structure seems to be the opposite, with a curriculum more like the school curriculum, while at the same time, there is no hierarchy in the staff structure as we traditionally see in school.

Historically, both in Norway and Sweden, the ideal for preschools was the typical good home. The institutions in Norway, however, were not discussed in public until the 1950s. It was not until 1975 that preschool was mentioned as a pedagogical institution and got its own legislation. Preschools have a strong tradition as privately run institutions. Still today about one-third of the Norwegian preschools are run privately. Next to parent-owned preschools and sole-proprietor preschools come private preschools run by religious congregations or societies. In Swedish society, family and young children were discussed as a political matter as early as the 1950s and 1960s. As mentioned earlier, this trend resulted in the Swedish government in 1968 calling a committee to analyze the content and methods in preschools (Barnstugeutredningen). Development in Norway was much slower. The reason for the slower tempo in Norway can be traced to its later industrialization and to less urbanization. Another factor that could have had an influence was that Sweden had a stronger connection to the continent of Europe (Balke, 1995, pp. 243-251).

Today, however, there is a shift towards more academically oriented preschools in both countries. With this change of perspective, there is a risk that the staff might begin to treat preschool as school. There are, of course, examples of these kinds of school-like preschools both in Sweden and in Norway (Alvestad, 1989). To avoid this development, it is important for preschool teachers to implement the new curricula without losing the heart of the preschool tradition, which takes a great deal of training. Preschool teachers have to understand the child's perspective but also understand a new theoretical perspective on learning and knowledge formation (Doverborg & Pramling, 1995; Pramling Samuelsson & Lindahl, 1999). In other words, teachers have to learn about children from children. Teachers also have to learn about the mandate of society, as it is formulated in the curriculum and other official documents. They have to create their own understanding of how the new plans differ from earlier guidelines and the implications of the plans for each institution. They have to, for example, turn central concepts like democracy (as well as play and learning) upside down and discuss them from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view. Finally, preschool teachers have to learn about themselves—to learn

about how to become aware of their own values and beliefs, and how these are influencing everyday interactions with children (Pramling Samuelsson, 1998).

Notes

1. In Sweden, preschool is the official name for day care as well as kindergarten, whereas the term day care is used in Norway. To make it easier for the reader to follow, when we do not refer to Norwegian texts, we will use the term preschool for both countries.

2. Day care institutions were for the first time discussed publicly in 1951. In 1953, they were defined as child welfare institutions, under the Act of Social Welfare, and were headed under the former Department of Social Welfare. It took more than 20 years (1975) before Norway got an Act for Day Care Institutions that regulated day care centers as pedagogical institutions (Balke, 1995, p. 246).

3. Owners of private day care institutions may prescribe in their by-laws that the plan's second paragraph concerning upbringing that accords to Christian values should not apply. Private day care institutions and day care institutions owned or run by parishes of the Norwegian State Church may incorporate in their by-laws special provisions pertaining to ideological aims (Q-0902B, 1995, p.7; Q-0917E, 1996, p. 4).

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